

## New regional 'in-security' system in Central Asia

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1. Ten years have passed since the Central Asian states declared their independence, but their relationship with Russia still remains close, and the latter treats them as its exclusive zone of influence. A crucial reason for keeping Central Asia within the orbit of Moscow's influence is the fact that Russia exercises control over the most important transport routes out of the region of raw materials for the power industry, on which the economic development of Asia depends on. But this is the only manifestation of Central Asia's economic dependence on Russia. Moscow lacks solid economic instruments (i.e. investment input or power industry dependence) to shape the situation in the region. As the present forms of political cooperation within the CIS, Customs Union etc. are not bringing the expected results, it is the regional security system based on military dominance, developed by Russia, which is particularly gaining in importance. Russia treats its direct military presence as a condition for full implementation of its policy towards the region and towards Afghanistan. For two years Moscow has been successful in this area.

2. The basic reason why the Central Asian states are compelled to participate in building regional order with the help of Russia is the threat posed by the activities of fundamentalist Islamic movements. The most serious manifestations of this threat were the two Batken-area crises in 1999 and 2000. The fear of the results of the current civil war in Afghanistan is constantly growing. It is in Russia's interest to maintain the state of threat and tension in Central Asia, and Russia fuels it and benefits from it.

3. Central Asia is also an area of influence-building for some Western countries (mainly Turkey and the United States). Since last year, in response to a system of regional security developed under the aegis of Russia, the United States and Turkey have been trying to get involved in military cooperation in the region. Such measures do not constitute a counterbalance to the Russian presence, but they do extend the room for political manoeuvre of the diplomacies of the countries in the region.

4. Afghanistan and the civil war there is having a great impact on the situation in Central Asia. The military success of the Taliban in summer 2000 considerably enhanced their prestige and increased fears that the conflict could expand. They also made the Central Asian countries revise their policy towards Afghanistan. On the one hand, this means seek-

ing protection against the Taliban from Moscow, and on the other hand preparing to negotiate a peaceful relationship (particularly in the case of Uzbekistan). The war in Afghanistan and the increasing involvement of Russia, Iran, India, Pakistan and the United States have more and more influence on the political situation in Central Asia.

5. The Central Asian countries lack capacities to find a sovereign solution to their regional problems, particularly the political ones. This is due to the internal weakness of these countries and the strong influence of Russia in the region. (This applies to Tajikistan the most, Kazakhstan the least). For them the most effective way to pursue strategic goals is to take advantage of the interests of foreign powers that are engaged in the region. This gives the opportunity to manoeuvre between Moscow, Washington, Islamabad and others, which they are trying to do.

6. The key country for security issues of the region is Uzbekistan. At the same time this is the country that faces the most serious threat from fundamentalism, and the one which is Russia's most inconvenient partner due to its independent policy. All the problems related to security, Russia's military position and the future political shape of the region will be handled with Uzbekistan's participation. The latter is, and will remain, the main addressee both of cooperation offers (i.e. from America and Turkey) and attacks (from Russia).

7. Despite Uzbekistan's position and its significance for political stability, it is Kazakhstan that is now strengthening its role of a regional leader. This is due both to its natural advantages (natural resources, geographical location, distance from the focus of unrest) and (relatively) reasonable and balanced domestic and foreign policy of the president, Nursultan Nazarbayev. Kazakhstan is the most stable and the most promising, economically and politically, country of the region.

## The Islamic threat in Central Asia

In 1997 the five-year civil war in Tajikistan between the Islamic opposition and the post-communist government, supported by Russia and Tajikistan's neighbours, came to an end. As a result a new balance of power between the fighting parties came into being, and the governing party assumed a dominant position. In practical terms, it meant that the country was broken up into small 'duchies'. No one exercised any control over them and there were excellent conditions for criminal activities (mainly connected to drugs trade) and quasi-political activities (military troops without any supervision, training camps for mujahideen, etc.)<sup>1</sup>. A lasting element of the new political order is the presence of Russian bases on the territory of Tajikistan – the only country in the region where there are still permanent Russian troop bases. However, when the war in Tajikistan came to an end it seemed that the threat of Islamic fundamentalism had been prevented.

The event that proved that it was just to the contrary was a series of bomb attacks on the president of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov in February 1999. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the armed Islamic opposition operating in Tajikistan and Afghanistan, associated with leaders of the former Tajik opposition from the war period, claimed responsibility for the attack. The (unsuccessful) attacks on Karimov turned out to be just the beginning: between August and November 1999 fighting broke out in Kyrgyzstan, in the Batken area, between the IMU and Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan forces. According to the IMU the aim of the operation was to foment an uprising in the Uzbek part of the Fergana Valley and to found an Islamic state there. After a four-month crisis, the undefeated mujahideen withdrew to Tajikistan, taking a ransom for hostages.

The crisis has revealed Kyrgyzstan's total incapability and Uzbekistan's limited effectiveness in finding a sovereign military solution to such problems. In the aftermath of the crisis some initiatives have emerged aimed at creating a regional security system. The common denominator of these projects was the participation of Russia as main guardian and ally, offering political and military support (related to equipment, training and counselling). For Uzbekistan this meant giving up the policy of independence from Russia and the policy of close military and political cooperation with NATO (the United States and Turkey).

The Batken scenario repeated itself in August and September 2000. IMU troops attacked the border of Kyrgyzstan in the direc-

tion of Batken; moreover, they invaded the southern section of the Tajik-Uzbek border (the Surhandarian district). There were also incidental clashes farther into Uzbekistan (the Kamchik pass, in the Tashkent area). The mujahideen failed to fight their way through to the mainland of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan (if that was really their aim, which is not evident). After Batken 2000, and a period of waiting for another similar operation (Batken 2001?), the military cooperation between Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Russia was enhanced. Karimov, however, accused the Tajik (and indirectly the Russian) authorities of being passive during the crisis and tolerating the presence of the IMU in Tajikistan, and he once again tried to distance himself from Moscow (this subject will be elaborated later on).

## The problem of Afghanistan

Another destabilising factor in Central Asia, apart from the IMU's activities, is the civil war, which has been going on for 21 years. Afghanistan's negative influence has escalated with the rise of the Taliban as a dominant force (since 1995–6), who were identified with extremely aggressive Islamic fundamentalism. Moreover, Afghanistan has become the world centre for producing opium and its derivatives. Drugs are being smuggled to the north through the post-Soviet republics. A great problem for the neighbours is also refugees, who are constantly fleeing in great numbers from Afghanistan. Eventually Afghanistan became a base for mujahideen operating in Tajikistan, in the Caucasus, Kashmir and so on. Many politicians were afraid that the Taliban wanted further expansion north (and the media were portraying it as a certainty). This exacerbated hostilities between the Central Asian countries and Russia, and was partly the reason why both Russia and the countries of Central Asia (particularly Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) supported the opponents of the Taliban – the legal government of the so-called Northern Alliance, led by President Rabani and Ahmed Shah Masoud.

In September 2000 the situation on the Afghan front reached a critical point, when it seemed that another offensive of the Taliban would ultimately defeat the Alliance and enable them to take control over the whole country<sup>2</sup>. Only immediate help in providing military equipment offered by Russia, Iran and India, and Iranian aid in preventing internal tensions in the Alliance saved Masoud from defeat and thus enabled him to go onto the counteroffensive. The summer successes of the Taliban led to considerable agitation in the Central Asian capitals, and the Taliban themselves

came to be perceived as a serious political factor for the region. The role of Afghanistan began to resemble the role of Batken – it became a threat that only Russia can face and thus become a guardian of safety for the Central Asian republics.

## Central Asian countries in the face of threats

The fears of Islamic threat in the Central Asian countries are hardly unfounded. In particular the threat concerns Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and to an extent also Tajikistan. Both Batken crises have proved that a relatively small group of mujahideen can shake the foundations of a small country like Kyrgyzstan, and even of the regional power Uzbekistan. During Batken 1999 the IMU forces numbered not more than 400 mujahideen; during Batken 2000 there were several units, each of them numbering several dozens. Their action have caused significant political shifts, rapid armament escalation and acceleration of reforms in the army (which had not been capable of defending the country), massive investments in border fortifications and in planting minefields<sup>3</sup>.

These events unveiled the complexity of internal problems that the young Central Asian states failed to deal with successfully<sup>4</sup>. They include, among other elements; internal ethnic conflicts, regional conflicts, social crises caused by a general population explosion, unemployment and lack of prospects, and economic depression. Last but not least, one cannot fail to notice the weaknesses of the political systems in the countries of the region, particularly in Uzbekistan: power is centralised, exercised by the president and a narrow para-mafia of groups comprising his followers. There is no room for any opposition, which means there is also no room for channelling social discontent or for developing a state-building elite. In extreme circumstances, this would mean that the downfall of the president may lead to the break-up of the country.

The complex of problems related to the Islamic and Afghan threat has once again exposed the total incapability of the countries of the region to cooperate effectively in the face of threat. Despite the fact that numerous agreements and aid declarations were signed during successive crises, it was not possible to carry out a collective operation against the IMU, and Russia was obliged to participate in all the potential projects. The lack of cooperation among Tashkent, Dushanbe, Bishkek and Astana is the result of long-escalating conflicts related to economy, politics, ethnic issues and power struggles in the region, particularly between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. The attitude of Tajik politicians

proves beyond doubt that the IMU activity targeted at Uzbekistan is accommodating to it – the troubles that IMU causes to Tashkent prevent the latter from becoming involved in the internal affairs of Tajikistan, as had previously been the case.

The Islamic threat, with the whole complexity of that problem, is a serious challenge to a region that is capable of facing it unaided to only a very limited extent.

We should, however, bear in mind another aspect of the changes taking place in the region: the increased significance of the position of Kazakhstan with respect to Uzbekistan.

The last decade bore witness to a power struggle in the region between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Presently one can speak about the dynamically increasing dominance of Kazakhstan, which is due both to its different strategic aims of the passing decade and to the processes that have been taking place for the last two years. In this struggle the trump card of Uzbekistan was first of all its military and population potential, with which help President Islam Karimov was trying to replace Russia in the role of regional ruling power. The problems that appeared in connection with Islamic fundamentalism revealed the limitations of Uzbekistan and shook its position. Consequently Uzbekistan is becoming more and more isolated, whereas Kazakhstan has chosen the policy of mitigating internal conflicts, political stability and creating conditions that are conducive to economic development. In his international policy, President Nursultan Nazarbayev succeeded in avoiding major conflicts and in developing cooperation both with Russia and with the West; the results of such approach are already becoming visible, particularly when seen in the light of Uzbekistan's regress. Also, the present threats connected to fundamentalism and to the war in Afghanistan have a much more negative impact on Uzbekistan than they have on Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan may be very close to the problem (among others the IMU has attacked near the border with Uzbekistan, and there is the problem of drugs from Afghanistan) but it is Uzbekistan that is in the very centre of the problem. Kazakhstan can find a way to cooperate with Russia, and also room for its own military presence in the region, whereas Uzbekistan holds the opinion that this approach basically contradicts the strategic aims of regional policy. As a result, relative internal stability, growing economic potential and a foreign policy aware of its limitations allow Kazakhstan more room for political manoeuvre, more reliable instruments for building its influence in the region, and a much better bargaining position in its relationship with Moscow, Washington and with other capitals.

## A new security system

The crisis growing around the problem of fundamentalism was a major breakthrough in the relationship between Central Asia and Russia in such areas as security and military cooperation. Until the time of the Batken crises, the main forms of Russian military presence in the region were the forces stationed in Tajikistan (201st Mechanised Division and border protection forces). The link between Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Russia was the Tashkent Agreement<sup>5</sup>, that guaranteed aid in case of external threat. But the Agreement remained a paper treaty, which was further confirmed by the departure of Uzbekistan (1999).

At the same time Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan (formally) and Uzbekistan were connected with the NATO project 'Partnership for Peace' and Uzbekistan was additionally involved in intense bilateral military cooperation with Turkey and the United States, and it joined the process of building an alliance distancing itself from Russia. The allied countries were Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova (GUUAM)<sup>6</sup>.

After 1999, the Batken events made all the countries of the region, including Uzbekistan, reflect on them in the same way: Russia is the one and only country that is capable of offering help in the face of a threat; Russia is strong, it is the nearest power, and there are channels of cooperation. Russia took advantage of the situation, and in autumn and winter 1999 signed a series of bilateral agreements on military cooperation with all the countries in the region (except for Turkmenistan), and it also prompted international fora to fight the threat. Among these fora was the Shanghai Five (Russia, Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan), and in 2000 Karimov for the first time took part in its sessions.

Russian passivity during the Batken 2000 crisis chilled Uzbekistan's relationship towards Russia considerably; however the remaining countries enhanced their cooperation with Russia. In October 2000 in Bishkek, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Armenia and Belarus signed an agreement on establishing regional rapid reaction units to fight threats of the Batken and Afghan type, the priority being the Central Asian direction<sup>7</sup>. Political agreements were immediately followed by concrete actions that were to enable (in terms of legal and organisational issues) military cooperation, additional armament of the region, and the stationing of allied forces. The formation of rapid reaction units gives Russia the opportunity to establish its military presence beyond the territory of Tajikistan, legally and with the region's

consent, or even at its invitation. And this step is an unquestionable sign of influence, of the readiness to defend this influence and to expand it.

In Central Asia Uzbekistan is the most reluctant country as far as the attitude towards Russia is concerned. The new agreement therefore serves as a means to discipline Karimov. And for Uzbekistan's neighbours, Russia becomes, in a way, a guardian of protection against Uzbek expansion. The very idea of regional forces and Russian presence in the region threatens the strategic interests of Uzbekistan, which is again trying to distance itself from Russia and to limit its opportunities to influence the situation in the region. That is why the presence of Russian troops in the near vicinity of Uzbekistan does not fit in with the tactical concessions that Karimov is ready to make. The first step taken by Russia, evidently aimed at putting Uzbekistan under pressure, is to establish an air-force base in Chkalovsk (northern Tajikistan), which means that Russian aircrafts need only a dozen minutes or so to reach all the strategic structures of Uzbekistan<sup>8</sup>. Regional rapid reaction units are to be created in spring 2001 in the face of expected IMU operations and the anticipated increase in tensions on the border with Afghanistan, and the odds are that this time the military forces will not be created on paper only.

Since the Taliban's summer offensive, Russia has redoubled its efforts in monitoring events in Afghanistan, and its position is decidedly anti-Taliban. Nor does it exclude the possibility of preventive air raids on the Taliban under the pretext of destroying terrorist bases. Such action could result in Taliban retaliation against the neighbouring Central Asian countries. Such an attack would only confirm the necessity for a Russian presence and for the existence of regional forces.

We can therefore speak about the establishment of a regional security system based on Russia<sup>9</sup>. Russia has the opportunity to apply strong instruments of pressure on the region, which is significant in the context of its weak economic position and of the fact that the instruments it has used until now have lost some of their power.

What is characteristic of the situation is the fact that while reinforcing militarily, Russia is also becoming the main architect of political life in the region; it creates a system in which life in the region focuses around Russia itself and its initiatives. For the last few months there have hardly been any bilateral meetings of Central Asian heads of states; they met exclusively at the summit meetings that took place under the aegis of Moscow. What is also characteristic is the fact that these were not only meetings concerning security. A good opportunity for a summit meeting is

cooperation within the Eurasian Economic Community, which was formed only a day before the signing of the agreement to form rapid reaction units. The Community, which comprises Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, is to work out mechanisms that recreate a common economic zone among these countries. And although in the first quarter since the Community was established no substantive measures have been taken (just as was earlier the case with the Customs Union), the Community remains a political fact with a large potential.

## Russia and the Islamic threat in Central Asia

The justification of the increasing military presence in Central Asia is the lack of stability in the region, and the threat on the part of subversive Islamic movements like the IMU. We can clearly answer, without going into details of the IMU's history, links and manifestos, only one question: *cui bono*? The one who benefits is probably the one who instigates. The only beneficiary of an Islamic threat is Russia which, owing to the threat, is strengthening its position in the region.

We should bear in mind that in similar circumstances Russian bases appeared in Tajikistan<sup>10</sup> – Russian troops were helping the authorities in Dushanbe to fight Islamic opposition. Presently Russian bases are bordering on IMU bases in Tajikistan, and Russia – contrary to its solemn declarations – is doing nothing to eliminate them. On the contrary: IMU preparations for warfare in 2000 took place with the support of government agencies in Tajikistan, Russia's faithful ally. Russia, just like Tajikistan, was passive with respect to the battles that were going on in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, but it did not however permit any operations on the territory of Tajikistan, which is what Uzbekistan was aiming at. This seems to confirm the theory that the existence of IMU-like groups is convenient for Russia – moreover, it may be their instigator. Even more so as the IMU's main target is Uzbekistan, which is the main troublemaker for Russia.

Tajikistan is the most fully implemented model of instability controlled by Russia. There is hardly any civil service any more: the government does not have the necessary instruments to control the country and it is compelled to share its powers with local military leaders, mafia-clan groups and Russians. Paradoxically, Tajikistan is the only country in the region in which Islamic parties act legally and former mujahideen sit in the parliament, government and central administration – and they are used equally

by Russians and by the government. Due to its military presence and involvement in internal conflicts, Russia has secured for itself an unquestionable dominance in the country, as well as an instrument for exercising control over the situation in the region. Tajikistan allows Russian military men to gain the lion's share of profits from drug trafficking, gives them opportunities for promotion, advancing their careers and so on. Russian control over drugs and the IMU give the most spectacular instruments for exporting Tajik instability to other countries in the region.

The arrangements that exist in Tajikistan are very convenient for Russia and do not require any major input. But they do bring enormous political benefits. Today Tajikistan is undoubtedly the best model for Russia in securing its interest, a model in which controlled instability and conflicts, both internal and external, are exemplary. However, the situation may get out of control and this would be a major threat to Russia. Therefore military presence seems to be the way to exercise control, not only over the countries of the region, but also over the mujahideen and over Afghanistan. Moscow itself is apprehensive of whether danger should be courted in such a way. Such fears were manifested in direct secret negotiations conducted with the Taliban from April until August last year. The negotiations were to prepare Russia for shaping a peaceful relationship with the Taliban after their then expected victory over the Northern Alliance. Eventually Moscow broke off the negotiations and resumed aid to Masoud, showing that the fears aroused by the mujahideen and the Taliban mean less than the expected benefits.

## Alternatives and the unknown

Russia has undoubtedly the strongest impact on the way the situation in Central Asia is developing, and it is encountering more and more submission on the part of the countries in the region in the security field.

But this in no ways mean that during the process of strengthening its position in the countries concerned, Russia has not encountered any opposition, or that it does not have to take the competition into account, or that it has a grip on every aspect of regional and supra-regional affairs. First of all, for the last nine years the Central Asian countries have managed to develop political and economic organisations that have been evolving independently of Russia (with the least success in the field of security). Year after year in Asia the law, the state administration, the social and economic structures have resembled less and less the situation in the Russian

Federation, which is also changing. For nine years the region has been open to the world – in the economic sense (Russian goods have been replaced by Iranian, Chinese and Turkish ones) and in the political sense (although with more difficulty).

Furthermore, other countries apart from Russia are trying to strengthen their position in Central Asia – the United States, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, China – which is extending the room for manoeuvre for the countries of Central Asia. The games between these countries makes Central Asia an important element of the Great Game, in which the future balance of powers on the whole continent is at stake – or even, through the fact that the greatest superpowers also take part in the Game, in the world.

## The West and its attitude towards Central Asia in the Batken period

For the West – particularly for the United States and Turkey, the most active states – the strategic aim is to have a stable group of countries, located in the southern part of the former Soviet Union, which are politically, economically, militarily and culturally aligned with the West, and which are independent of Russia and Iran. In this respect it means that they are striving to wrench the Central Asian countries free from under the political and military dominance of Russia.

Uzbekistan, which has been cooperating in military affairs with the United States and Turkey, is traditionally the most open to such initiatives. The Batken crisis in 1999, and the simultaneous criticism of Karimov for violating human rights expressed by the West, pushed Tashkent towards Russia. The Batken crisis in 2000 demonstrated, however, the ambiguity of an alliance with Russia and so created an opportunity to renew close relations with the West. Moscow's initial passive attitude (in the first weeks of the crisis) contrasted with the revival in the relationships between Tashkent and Washington, and Tashkent and Ankara. Within just a few months after August 2000 there were a dozen or so mutual visits on different levels; Turkish president Ahmed Necdet Sezer, the Turkish home secretary, military men, politicians and businessmen were among others all guests in Central Asia, as were senior civil servants from Washington and the Pentagon, including the adviser for the Secretary of State Steven Sestanovich; and Uzbekistan's new defence minister paid his first visit abroad to Washington. A series of detailed agreements concerning the purchase of military equipment, Uzbek training in the West, common

projects for fighting terrorism etc., were made. The United States suggested its readiness to replace Russia in the role of protector against the Taliban, as it wanted to carry out air raids on Afghanistan from the territory of Uzbekistan or Kazakhstan, but that situation did not in the end arise.

Although one can hardly expect that cooperation between Uzbekistan and the West could acquire a strategic and binding character, it does provide relief for Tashkent as it enables to ease the results of its present political isolation; finally, the cooperation is a bargaining chip in its relationship with Russia. The policy that Karimov has pursued until now demonstrates that his political possibilities are naturally restricted to steering a middle course between Russia and the West. It seems that this is exactly the room for manoeuvre, the possibility to influence the interests of the more powerful countries, this 'multi-vector' policy that determines the political independence of the Central Asian countries. Karimov cannot underestimate Moscow because it is Moscow, and not Washington, that has every power to keep him or remove him from office. Reports from the December talks between Karimov and Vladimir Putin, the Russian president, make one suppose that Tashkent has taken note of Russian dominance (the new air-force base in Chkalovsk has probably contributed to that) and it will keep trying to play a double game. And it is up to Washington and Ankara to find a place for their interests in this game.

## **'The Great Game' – the southern areas**

The future of the Central Asian republics, and the position of Russia in the Middle East and South Asia, depends for the most part on the situation in Afghanistan. This is another factor that keeps escaping Russia's full control. Moscow can influence the situation in Afghanistan first of all through the Northern Alliance. By offering or withholding military aid to the Alliance Russia can, indirectly, influence the balance of power in Afghanistan. Withholding aid for Masoud in winter 1999 contributed to his defeat in August and September 2000. On the other hand, a sweeping victory for the Taliban would be a considerable threat to the strategic interests of Russia, not only in Afghanistan but also in Central Asia. One trump card that enables Russia to exercise control over Central Asia is its control over transport routes of the region. A stable situation in Afghanistan would offer an opportunity to open the region to the south, and to break up Russia's transport monopoly, which is what Turkmenistan has been trying to do for

years. The victory of the Taliban would at the same time mean a considerable increase in the significance of Pakistan – the protector of the Taliban. The high probability of such a situation may have caused a revolution in Central Asian regional policy. In autumn 2000 Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and most notably Uzbekistan established unofficial relations with the Taliban, and were close to recognising them diplomatically (up till now only Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have done so). For Karimov such a close relationship with the Taliban, whom he has been fighting up till now, would allow him to kill two birds with one stone: to wrench himself free from regional isolation and to 'tame' the worst enemy – militant Islam – and thus to weaken Russian instruments of pressure<sup>11</sup>. While visiting Ashkabad and Astana, the Pakistani leader General Musharraf has attempted to develop such tendencies in the region. Pakistan is also trying to take the limelight within the Shanghai Five, which would enable it to participate in creating the political reality in the region. So far, however, the Pakistani initiatives have brought about no major developments. Moreover, the successes of Pakistan and the Taliban in Afghanistan have enhanced cooperation within the former strategic triangle of Moscow-Teheran-Delhi, whose help had enabled the Northern Alliance to survive and then to go onto the counteroffensive<sup>12</sup>.

Enhanced cooperation among Russia, Iran and India – which means, apart from cooperation regarding the Afghan issue, also the development of political and military cooperation – can considerably lessen the influence that the United States have on the processes taking place in Central Asia and in Afghanistan itself, although it is too early to speak about a future strategic character of the triangle. Washington's attempts to ease the tension in Afghanistan (among other ways by forming a coalition government under the aegis of former king Zahir Shah and the tribal council, the Loya Jirga), and to eliminate drug trade sources and Islamic terrorism on the Taliban-controlled territory have brought no results until now. The successful imposition of UN sanctions against the Taliban in December 2000, which was something that the United States had been striving for, and the United States' readiness to carry out air raids on terrorist camps operating under the aegis of the Taliban, have weakened links with Pakistan, the United States' only partner in the region.

These are hardly good prospects for Central Asia: the war in Afghanistan will not come to an end soon, and so opening up the south is out of the question; the current Afghan conflict allows Russia to influence the issue of Islamic threat; and Russian

activity in Afghanistan may draw Central Asia into the conflict, which will further strengthen Russia's position.

## Forecasts:

1. One should expect another IMU attack on Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. First of all, this is because the IRU was not crushed; it has relatively large forces at its disposal, and lack of action deprives it of its *raison d'être*. Secondly, this is due to the presumption that the IRU is acting at Russia's instigation: an attack targeted first of all at Uzbekistan would be a way to humiliate Karimov and to draw him into the orbit of Russian influence.
2. One should expect that the conflict in Afghanistan will worsen further. None of the powers that are indirectly engaged in the conflict will permit its opponents to dominate Afghanistan. The Northern Alliance forces will try to regain their position thanks to outside help. It seems unlikely that the Northern Alliance and Taliban could enter into a peace agreement and, if this were the case, it would be impossible for both sides to keep it. The active involvement of Russia and its allies in the conflict is a probable development, for example in the form of conducting air raids, which would undoubtedly exacerbate the situation in the region.
3. The aforementioned situation will accelerate the process of forming the rapid reaction units under the aegis of Russia, establishing new military bases in Central Asia and providing reinforcements for Russian troops on the Afghan border.
4. One should expect serious manifestations of the internal crisis in Uzbekistan. Karimov is not taking any steps to relieve social and economic tensions. Uzbekistan will also suffer the most from IMU attacks - this would enable to prove to Karimov the necessity for close cooperation with Russia, which will probably successfully defend Kyrgyzstan against the IMU. In case Karimov should further resist such cooperation with Russia, one cannot exclude a change in presidential office instigated by the Kremlin: the country has sufficient instability potential to arrange Karimov's removal. One should also bear in mind that in similar circumstances Russia removed the presidents of Georgia (Gamsakhurdia) and Azerbaijan (Elchibey).
5. The development of the situation in the region unambiguously indicates that the position of Kazakhstan is gaining importance. This is the most orderly country with significant economic potential and human resources, the least endangered by internal upheaval, including the threat of Islamic fundamentalism. Uzbekistan weakness, Nazarbayev's well-balanced policy, and

finally its natural resources make Kazakhstan the most serious and reliable partner in Central Asia for Russia and for the West, Iran and Pakistan.

6. One should expect further interest from the United States, Turkey and Pakistan in the region. But the amount of interest will depend on internal developments in those countries: on the policy of the new president of the United States, George Bush, towards Russia, Iran and Pakistan (during the Clinton presidency the strategic alliance between the United States and Pakistan was weakened); on stability in Pakistan in the context of escalating internal conflicts related, among others, to the 'Talibanisation' of Pakistan; finally, on the situation in Iran (apart from many unsolved problems, Iran is expecting a stormy presidential election).

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<sup>1</sup> Among others Sanobar Szermatowa, „Druzja i wragi Rachmonowa”, *Moskowskije Nowosti*, 12.09.2000 [confirmed by on-the-spot observation – K.S.].

<sup>2</sup> Cf. General (ret'd) Mirza Aslam Beg, “Taliban baffle military analysts”, “The News: Jang-Comment”, 11.08.2000.

<sup>3</sup> Among others Władimir Muchin, „Kardinalnaja wojennaja riefirma w Uzbekistanie”, *Niezawisimaja Gazieta*, 06.10.2000.

Kazakhstan: Power Shift in Central Asia, 22.09.2000 [www.stratfor.com](http://www.stratfor.com)

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Dr. Robert M. Cutler, “Uzbekistan's Foreign Policy And Its Domestic Effects”, *Biweekly Briefing*, 08.11. 2000

<sup>5</sup> This concerns the CIS collective security system that was signed in May 1992 in Tashkent, and ratified for 5 years in April 1994. The signatories were the following countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan declared its departure in February 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Created in November 1997 by Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova (GUAM); enlarged by Uzbekistan in April 1999 (GUUAM).

<sup>7</sup> Among others „W Rossii pojaviasia azjatskije bataliony iz-za wierojatnosti stolknowienia s talibami wiesnoj buduszczo goda”, *Gazeta.ru*, 11.10.2000

<sup>8</sup> Jurij Czernogajew, „Rossija obustroit w Tadżykistanie wojennyj aerodrom. W połuczasie lota do luboj iz stolic Sriedniej Azii”, *Kommiersant*, 27.12.2000.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Dmitri Trenin, “Central Asia's Stability and Russia's Security”, Carnegie Moscow Center, November 2000.

<sup>10</sup> As a matter of fact they have been in Tajikistan all the time since the Soviet era, although after the Soviet break-up their status has changed.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Pauline Jones Luong, “A Dangerous Balancing Act: Karimov, Putin, and the Taliban”, Yale University-November 2000

<sup>12</sup> “Indo-Russo nexus against Taliban....”, *Frontier Post*, 6.10.2000. “The New Course of Indian Relations With Russia”, 03.10.2000, [www.stratfor.com](http://www.stratfor.com)